

## **John Buck and Deborah Butterfield**

John Buck and Deborah Butterfield are each world-renowned artists who, as a couple, have generously shared their home, time and talents with countless Montana artists and art students.

Buck is both a sculptor and a printmaker who works with carved wood, assemblage and bronze sculptures, as well as creating large, multicolored woodblock prints.

Since beginning his collaboration with master printmaker Bud Shark in 1983, Buck has explored the expressive possibilities of woodblock in more than 40 different prints. Using a pen, a nail or his fingernail, the artist incises the wood planks that form the base and background of his prints with images and symbols drawn from the daily news, his own sculpture and from nature. He embeds that base with a large, carved image, often of a figure, although he has also depicted a jar full of fireflies, an eagle, or a subtly colored moth.

As a skilled wood carver and fabricator, Buck has also created a unique language of three-dimensional symbols to comment on the world and our position in it.

“John Buck’s fertile imagination, deft and constantly refining craftsmanship, extraordinary work ethic, and ambitious vision have produced a stunning legacy of works,” writes artist Gordon McConnell, a former curator and assistant director at the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings. Buck’s prints and sculptures are in major public collections from New York to San Francisco, and his lengthy list of awards includes a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and a National Artists Award.

Butterfield – known for her sculptures of horses – employs scraps of metal, wood and other found objects, often cast in bronze.

An avid horsewoman and accomplished dressage rider, she has an extensive boarding and riding facility near Bozeman devoted to equestrian pursuits. Her intimate understanding of these majestic animals seems to infuse her sculptures, which vary in scale from quarter life-size to larger-than-life.

Her partnership with a bronze foundry in Walla Walla, WA, has enabled her to fasten found objects, including logs, branches, sticks, planks and boards, onto an armature, which is recreated at the foundry. The stunning results of the elaborate casting and patina process translate Butterfield’s passionate, intuitive understanding of the horse into permanent, durable sculptures.

Her works are owned by many of the nation’s preeminent museums, including the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the San Francisco Museum of Contemporary Art and the Denver Art Museum.

In addition to receiving honorary doctorates from both Montana State University in Bozeman and Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Butterfield has received two fellowships from the NEA, as well as a Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship and the American Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award.

“Debbie and John are outstanding artists in any geography you could consider – international, national, regional, and certainly in the state of Montana,” writes Liz Gans, former director of the Holter Museum of Art in Helena. The museum highlighted Butterfield’s sculptures when it reopened in 2002 after a major renovation. “Her powerful horses in the High Gallery made the perfect statement for the new Holter: bold, appealing, reflecting Montana’s heritage while capturing the spirit of our own time.”

In addition to teaching at Montana State University (Buck from 1976-1990 and Butterfield from 1979-1987), the couple has supported art museums and institutions around the state, and welcomed inquisitive art students to their studios for a visit. They also funded an art program for the small Cottonwood elementary school, which their children attended, providing art instruction that wouldn't have existed otherwise.

"Perhaps one of the most important roles they have played is that of mentor and example to the state's artists through their ability to create very successful careers in New York and other urban centers while living in Montana," writes Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson, president of the Oregon College of Art and Craft and former director of Paris Gibson Square Museum in Great Falls and Beall Park Art Center in Bozeman.

In addition to serving as role models, they've also hosted world-renowned artists, gallery owners and collectors at their home in Bozeman and introduced their guests to artists from around the state. "This has helped connect Montana's artists to the larger art world, enabling some of the state's most outstanding artists to expand their markets and reputations, both regionally and nationally," says Laing-Malcolmson.

The couple has also hosted several unique art events, including a major one-week symposium in 1991 of artists from Montana's sister state of Kumamoto, Japan; and special exhibits and celebrations of the work and legacies of the late Robert and Gennie DeWeese (also Governor's Arts Award recipients).

"No other Montana-based artists since C.M. Russell have been embraced by such a wide public in and beyond Montana than Debbie and John, and none have done more to refresh and reinforce through their art the idea of this state," says Robyn Peterson, executive director of the Yellowstone Art Museum.

"They have embraced this place with the fierce affection that characterizes those who actively choose to make someplace home," she adds. "Both have created vital and sophisticated work that has entered and influenced the mainstream of contemporary American art to a degree that simply cannot be claimed by any other Montana-based artists."

*Profile written by Kristi Niemeyer for the Montana Arts Council.*